

# How to Design for the Live Online Classroom

*Creating Great Interactive and Collaborative  
Training Using Web Conferencing*

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## INTRODUCTION

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**Live online learning delivered using the Internet and desktop computers appeared in the 1990's, with products from iLinc, followed by HorizonLive, Centra, DataBeam and others, some no longer available.**

### A BRIEF HISTORY OF LIVE ONLINE LEARNING

The first major public introduction of synchronous technology to the training community may have been in early 1998 in Atlanta at the “Training” show, an annual conference for thousands of training professionals and vendors. It was the height of the dot-com craze, and early live online learning mirrored the same trends. People were throwing money at technology, thinking it was the answer they needed to solve any training issue. Organizations were willing to spend tens or hundreds of thousands of dollars on these new technologies – but these same organizations didn't allocate money and time to develop new best practices, new training designs, or new facilitation techniques. And the idea of managing the transition from the traditional classroom to the virtual classroom was largely ignored.

The dot-com bubble soon burst, of course. In the ensuing economic downturn, some learning technologies had more staying power than others – and organizations began to realize that merely having the technologies was not enough. Managers wanted to see some kind of measurable return on their investment in learning technologies. So organizations began an urgent search for best practices and case studies.

Then came the terrible events of September 11, 2001. For a short time, the fear of travel heightened the prospects for live online learning. Its advocates geared up for what promised to be a busy and profitable future.

However, changing workforce priorities and an American economy that continued to struggle meant that once again adoption and utilization of synchronous technologies was underwhelming at best.

The corporate propensity for throwing money at technology has abated, thank goodness. The focus has returned to teaching and learning. In corporate circles, instructional technology now needs to work.

## WHERE ARE WE NOW?

If you've been working in the training field for the last decade or so, you've heard of the virtual classroom, synchronous learning, live online learning, e-meetings, and Webinars. All of these terms mean basically the same thing: content delivered live over the Internet to geographically dispersed participants. Helping trainers and participants accept live online learning as legitimate is fundamental to the success of any live online learning initiative.

"Good design is key," says Skai Ruis, national e-learning manager with GreenPoint Mortgage in Novato, Calif.

Since live online learning is relatively new, training professionals have been creating programs without the benefit of successful models, without best practices, and without full knowledge of how to use the technology to its best advantage. Best practices are developing but haven't been widely shared. So a promising tool has gone misused and underused despite its bright prospects.

Many practitioners are nevertheless convinced that live online learning works. "I don't believe there is any instruction that I do face-to-face that I can't do as well, perhaps more effectively, in my live online class," says Barry Leshowitz, a psychology professor at Arizona State University in Tempe.

The live online learning environment can be good for all types of courses and all types of skills – technical, business, soft skills. But you must know your tools inside out and design an entire experience. If you want the same quality from your synchronous deliverables that you expect from your face-to-face programs, you must invest the same time and effort, the same instructional design resources and the same needs analyses.

You must pay attention to all the components – support materials, visuals, communications, interactions and collaborations, scripts, and more – to make this delivery format a success.

Live online learning, only beginning to realize its great promise, is still not well understood at many companies. A great need persists for more information about how live online learning works.

In this report, I have set out to gather emerging best practices and place them within the context of good design. I've collected these best practices over a decade of leading live online learning sessions. Other best practices come from real practitioners who face the day-to-day challenge of designing live online learning that works.

We'd like to thank all of those who contributed ideas. I hope that all readers find a number of useful practices herein for their own efforts to make synchronous learning work.

### IMMENSE IMPLICATIONS

Live online learning has great potential for delivering training to audiences who may otherwise not have the opportunity to participate in a learning event. The implications are immense for improving communication among organizations, bridging cultural divides, and providing educational opportunities to global destinations which might be expensive or time consuming to travel to in person.

The Brandon Hall Research report, "Live E-Learning 2004: Virtual Classrooms, Synchronous Tools, And Web Conferencing Systems," succinctly describes six purposes for live online sessions:

- *“Live e-learning/virtual classroom/Web conferencing systems provide excellent infrastructures for training.... Live e-learning systems can provide powerful infrastructures to address many business requirements:*
- *Training: Live e-learning systems provide an excellent way for an organization to have its experts teach a geographically dispersed group of participants. In addition, live e-learning systems enable real-time collaboration between participants, often allowing them to break out into smaller “rooms” to discuss and share ideas.*
- *Sales: Web conferencing systems provide an excellent way for sales teams to present information to prospective buyers. Unlike recorded product demos that provide no opportunity for the viewer to depart from the “script,” a product demo using Web conferencing allows the prospective customer to ask to see specific features demonstrated. In addition, using video during such a session can provide important face-to-face contact, leading to a more personal business setting.*
- *Communications: “It sure would be great if our VP could join us on this critical meeting. Unfortunately, she’s away on business until late next week.” Using Web conferencing, no one is ever unavailable due to being in a different physical location. If your VP can access the Internet, she’ll be able to participate in this critical meeting. Many Web conferencing systems also allow sessions to be recorded for future play-back. So, if a key team member can’t be present for a meeting due to scheduling conflicts, that individual can at least view the session at a later date to be kept informed of what occurred.*

- *Knowledge capture and management: Meetings can often produce excellent ideas. But unless those ideas are captured and made available, many great ideas will simply die away with no chance of being implemented. Many Web conferencing systems provide the ability to record sessions for future playback, helping organizations capture the ideas to help them reach fruition.*
- *Brainstorming: We are, in essence, a social species. Our sophisticated language skills allow us to easily share our thoughts and opinions with colleagues. Our tasks may be checked off our “To Do” lists when secluded in our offices, but our ideas are often born through discussions with colleagues. Web conferencing sessions allow this interaction to extend beyond geographic boundaries.*
- *Teamwork: Teams were traditionally defined as a group of people with complementary skills, located in the same geographic place, assigned to a common project. Web conferencing software removes the need for team members to work side-by-side. Team members can now be selected on the basis of the skills they will bring to a project rather than their place of residence.”*

### IS IT REAL LEARNING?

Given all those possibilities, why isn't the live online learning approach used more?

Learning professionals relatively new to the live online learning don't realize that “live and online” can mean more than a 60-minute lecture. Too many creators of live online learning give participants little or no opportunity for interaction with the course content and too few chances to collaborate with other participants.

When participants encounter programs that bore them, when session leaders don't prepare, when technical goofs slow a program, participants may get the impression that virtual classrooms are not as effective as traditional classrooms.

Trainers may not know how to assess participants' performance in a live online session to prove that it was a success. Indeed, trainers may not realize that assessment is as important online as it is in a traditional setting.

The reason that the above issues have merit is because live online learning, or synchronous learning – I'll call it by both names – has an identity crisis. Participants and training professionals alike don't think synchronous learning actually qualifies as real learning. “If this content was really important,” participants think, “they would send me to a *real* class.”

Not so long ago, participants had the same reaction to e-learning when it was first introduced. Self-directed, asynchronous learning on the Internet left participants alone at their desktop without any live instructional assistance. They were often frustrated and felt lost in cyberspace. Unsatisfactory experiences with self-paced e-learning have probably contributed to a negative perception of the live virtual classroom as well – even though in a live online classroom a facilitator is on hand to help participants learn. In fact, it's a shame that live online learning technologies came out only after self-paced e-learning technologies became popular because it probably would have made for an easier transition.

People who use live online learning find that indeed you can teach effectively with it – but first its advocates must convince trainers and participants that live online learning is *real* learning.

### **AND NOW... THE GOOD NEWS**

Although implementation has been slow, the idea of virtual classrooms in corporate training had staying power. Practitioners seem to have an instinctive belief that live online learning is a promising delivery system whose time is near.

Today, it's obvious to most professionals that live online learning does indeed have a bright future. In fact, as I mentioned, live online learning is an easier transition for participants who are accustomed to the traditional classroom. The online learning environment resembles the old-fashioned classroom by allowing participants to interact with facilitators and other participants. That makes live online learning more intuitive for participants than previous forms of e-learning.

The use of a virtual classroom means you can pull workers off the job for two hours, train them, and get them back to work with a limited interruption to productivity. In the old days, if a course took a half day or less, sending workers to the course almost always meant they would be away from their jobs for a full day. A lost day of productivity may not justify the training. Therefore, partial-day courses often didn't come to pass. That content had to wait until it could be combined with other material – allowing for a full day of training (or it may never have been taught at all).

With the rise of live online learning, however, trainers found they could deliver half-day courses, two-hour courses, even one-hour courses without pulling workers off the job for a full day. In fact, a live online course as short as 30 minutes can be effective. Participants can work until class time, set aside what they are doing, take the class, and be back on the job as soon as the class ends. In that 30 minutes, participants can often immediately apply the content they have learned.

## WORD USAGE

You'll hear a lot of terms referring to this type of training: synchronous, live and online, live e-learning, virtual classrooms. You might also hear people talk about e-meetings, Web conferencing, and e-rooms. Basically, each of these refers to the same process – sitting down at a computer for a real-time online session.

In this report, I'll use these expressions:

- Live online learning means learning that occurs over the Internet, often with the expectation of interaction among participants and facilitators.
- Synchronous learning is the same thing, although I'll use the expression "synchronous" more often in connection with the technology that delivers live online learning.
- Virtual classrooms are where live online learning takes place. A virtual classroom is the computer application provided by vendors such as WebEx or Centra.

These and other terms are in the glossary at the end of the report.

## REAL-WORLD GUIDANCE

I'll include advice and guidance from real designers of live online learning throughout the report, sometimes woven into the text and sometimes at the end of the section – beginning right here:

### ADVICE FROM PRACTITIONERS

- What does live online learning feel like? "Very similar" to classroom training. "More similar than different." – Mike Kemmler, Computer Mediated Learning NOW!, Elgin, Ill.
- "Imagine the virtual class like a normal class or hotel conference room. You will see some familiar social psychology at work." – Kenneth Strang, an independent education and project management consultant for small businesses in Fredericton, New Brunswick
- How do you get started? "Start small. Then find ways to reproduce in larger and larger scale." – Mike Kemmler, Computer Mediated Learning NOW!
- And the technology? "The technology will frustrate you. Have a back-up plan and support people on hand to help." – Michael Armacost, Catholic Health Initiatives, Englewood, Colo.